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SUBJECT: MOROCCO'S POLITICAL PARTIES: LAPDOGS OR DEMOCRATS?

REF: A. 05 RABAT 2166  
[1](#)B. 05 RABAT 2148  
[1](#)C. 05 RABAT 2605  
[1](#)D. RABAT 308  
[1](#)E. 05 RABAT 1456 AND PREVIOUS  
[1](#)F. 04 RABAT 1986  
[1](#)G. 04 RABAT 2031

Classified By: Ambassador Thomas T. Riley for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The series of splits, mergers, and coups that have dotted Morocco's already fractured political landscape since November 2005 attest to the fact that posturing for the 2007 parliamentary elections is in full swing. They also speak volumes about the force that King Mohammed VI's words about the direction of Morocco's political development play out within the political establishment. The King, whom the constitution endows with supreme power over all political matters, sets the tone and defines the limits for Moroccan political parties. His repeated calls since 2004 for a rationalization of the "Balkanized" political landscape culminated in parliament's passing in December 2005 of an Interior Ministry-drafted law on political parties that restricts public funding for parties to those who win at least 5 percent of the national vote. The new law also requires parties to practice more democracy and ensure greater financial transparency in their internal affairs. Of Morocco's 28 plus legally registered parties, because of their conviction-based platforms and comparatively stronger internal democracy, the Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD) and leftist Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) appear to be the two most likely to emerge to fulfill the King's vision of a "coherent" majority and "constructive" opposition in 2007, assuming that elections continue their trend of being freer and fairer than under former King Hassan II. This cable summarizes the institutional constraints that limit the political activities of Morocco's leading parties and assesses each of their strengths and weaknesses. End Summary.

Fractured Political Landscape  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) During the last parliamentary elections in 2002, which were by most accounts (including our own) the freest and fairest in Morocco to date, 28 political parties were officially registered at the Interior Ministry (MOI). Of the 26 that ran candidates, 22 won at least one seat in

parliament's Chamber of Representatives (lower house). The government that was formed reflected a 6-party coalition grouping together conservatives with the former Communist party and including multiple political tendencies in between.

The inability of the two main victors, the USFP and the Istiqlal Party, to agree on which should lead the government led in part to King Mohammed's decision to appoint technocrat and former Interior Minister Driss Jettou, who organized the elections, prime minister.

#### King Urges Political Rationalization

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13. (C) Critics point to the formation of this broad coalition comprising parties at ideological odds with one another as a key reason for the government's perceived failure to create enough jobs, improve services, and educate the population. This in turn has eroded the public's already low confidence in the political system. It also prompted public calls by the King, impatient with the government's slow-footedness in carrying out his vision for the country, for a "rationalization" of the political landscape and the formation of "strong coalitions" and "distinctive blocs" that compete with each other on the basis of specific development platforms (ref A). Starting with the 2007 parliamentary elections, these poles will vie with each other for power, alternating control at the top, subject to the demands of Moroccan citizens, according to the royal vision. But which of Morocco's 28 plus officially recognized parties are best positioned to fulfill this vision, and what are the institutional constraints that will limit their success?

#### Royal Constraints

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14. (C) Although each political formation is unique, all Moroccan parties are subject to the same constraints inherent to the political environment in which they operate. Despite being led by a generally progressive, reform-minded monarch, Morocco is a constitutional monarchy in which supreme authority rests with the King. Political parties exist at the King's discretion. During the reign of former King Hassan II, the Palace fragmented the political class, manipulated elections, co-opted or removed political opposition, and set up new parties to undercut the nationalist movement and encourage the development of a multi-party system. As lower house deputy Fatna El Khiel (Popular Movement) told Poloffs in October 2005, the "MOI is the father of all parties" (ref B). Since his arrival in 1999, King Mohammed has granted parties more political space and invited them to participate more in the exercise of power.

15. (C) Yet, according to the constitution, the King still appoints the government, presides over the Council of Ministers, and has the authority to, at his discretion, remove any minister, dissolve parliament, or rule by decree. Accordingly, Morocco's traditional parties are structured to confront the authority of the state rather than share in its power. They are oriented to fight for democracy rather than live it. The experience of their leaders has programmed them to believe that power and legitimacy come from the top of the pyramid where the King rules rather than from the bottom where the people are. The King's steady opening has disoriented most parties, which, wary perhaps of a possible rollback, have not fully adjusted to the new reality. Rather than reorienting themselves entirely toward the population, parties instead have intensified calls for constitutional reforms as a means to ensure that the opening is genuine and lasting.

#### Weak Internal Democracy

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16. (C) In the meantime, internally, most parties remain undemocratic and their structures anachronistic. Heavy-handed, aging leaders have taken possession of "their" parties, and their individual ambitions trump the party's

collective action on behalf of the public interests it supposedly represents. This culture creates an environment where dissent within parties is quieted or marginalized and, because leaders see youth and women as threats rather than tools for restoring party legitimacy, prospective leaders are stifled and women's access to political power is restricted. Party structures lack a robust framework for airing disputes. Militants who question the direction of their parties are left with few formal mechanisms to express disagreement, and internal revolts or party splits proliferate.

#### Poor Performance in Parliament

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¶17. (C) Parties also suffer from the poor image that their parliamentarians have in the eyes of the population. Research by MEPI/USAID-funded National Democratic Institute (NDI) shows that deputies are widely perceived as not taking their jobs seriously and are accused of protecting their own interests rather than representing those of citizens. The negative perception of parliament, where deputy absenteeism remains a serious concern, is well deserved in our view. A paltry 68 parliamentarians (21 percent) voted in the lower house's October 2005 vote on the political party law, for example, and just 102 (31 percent) were present during the November 2005 vote on the budget law, despite the fact that these two bills were arguably the most important pieces of legislation passed by parliament during its fall session. According to Istiqlal executive board member and upper house councilor Mohamed El Ansari, "only 10 percent of all deputies can be considered legitimate public servants; we're the ones who do all the work." Lower house deputy Ahmed Zarouf (Popular Movement) expressed identical statements to Poloffs in February 2006. Many deputies view their jobs as no more than a stepping stone to one day becoming a minister.

¶18. (C) Another part of the problem stems from the institutional deficiencies of parliament. Bureaucratically, it remains subordinate to the monarchy and is the last institution -- after the government, which proposes the bulk of Moroccan legislation, and civil society -- to deliberate legislation. The King reserves the right to veto any laws, dissolve either house of parliament, and set election dates. Deputies complain that the government is indifferent toward the legislature and lacks respect for the prerogatives delegated to the parliament in the area of legislative functioning and oversight of the executive branch. They also complain that the government, in the interests of the state, too often gives parliament too little time to deliberate draft laws, as was the case with U.S.-Morocco Free Trade Agreement-related, patent/trademark and copyright legislation passed in December 2005 (ref C). Meanwhile, the government is slow to take action on proposed legislation that originates in parliament. According to Moroccan press, the government has not yet responded to 109 law proposals ("propositions de loi") that parliament has made since October 2002.

#### Parties at Crossroads

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¶19. (C) Stuck between a monarch calling for a democratic reorientation of parties and a political system in which the same monarch holds and exerts supreme power, the political action of Morocco's leading parties -- with rare exception -- is rendered divided and ineffective. Preoccupied with the imbalance of power between parties and the Palace, parties expend tremendous energy and resources militating for expansion of the competencies of parliament and a strengthening of the prime minister's prerogatives. This effort diverts parties' attention away from their fundamental role as organizers of society and mouthpieces for the people, and it exacerbates the public's perception that politicians only care about their own interests and are out of touch with the people, as a recent poll by the MEPI/USAID-funded International Republican Institute found (ref C). This is one of the reasons that the King pushed for the adoption of a new law on political parties, passed by parliament in

December 2005, which raises the standards for internal democracy and financial transparency in party affairs (ref D). Only the strongest and nimblest parties will succeed in striking this delicate balance.

Party Assessment: Popular Movement Union (70 MPs)

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¶10. (SBU) Background: The traditionally rural Popular Movement Union (UMP) is the product of the impending re-constitution of Morocco's three pro-Berber parties -- the Popular Movement (MP), National Popular Movement (MNP), and the Democratic Union (UD) -- into one entity. The UMP will hold its constituent congress on March 24-25, 2006. Established in 1959, the Berber movement advocated unity around the monarch, Islamic socialism, the recognition of Amazigh as a national language, and opposition to the city dwellers' monopoly on government positions and preference for a one-party system. Despite their rural origins, the UMP parties have made important inroads into Morocco's cities, winning seats in Casablanca, Rabat, Sale, and Ouarzazate in the 2003 municipal elections.

¶11. (C) Strengths: As the largest caucus in the lower house, the UMP has the potential of becoming a formidable political force. Its greatest strength lies in the personalities of its members, many of whom are large landowners who wield significant influence in rural communities. UMP parties tend to enlist strong candidates whose Berber identity appeals to voters. They are long-standing allies of the Palace and, according to independent weekly Le Journal, their fusion comes at the urging of the MOI.

¶12. (C) Weaknesses: The UMP is very much a work in progress. It was not until January 2006 when members of the executive board of the UD orchestrated a revolt to overthrow UD founder and secretary general Bouazza Ikken that UD's support for the unified UMP was secured. (Note: The mutineers objected to Ikken's unilateral decisionmaking and constant waffling on the merger, according to press reports. End Note.) The new party will have to overcome the steeply

ingrained culture of rivalry and competition that flourishes at the base of the three formations. The UMP does what the Palace wants, has few original ideas, is aloof concerning the country's problems, and practices little internal democracy, as Ikken's clumsy ouster demonstrates. Despite being formed in 2004, the UMP caucus is undisciplined and members rarely follow the party's orders uniformly, as occurred in the elections for parliament speaker in April 2005 when a sizable group of UMP deputies refused to vote for Abdelwahed Radi (USFP) on the second ballot. As lower house deputy Zarouf explained to Poloffs in February 2006, deputies do not join the UMP because of a platform (which he said does not exist) but because it is convenient. It also remains to be seen whether MP secretary general and Minister of Agriculture Mohand Laenser and the MNP's domineering, octogenarian leader Mahjoubi Aherdan will be able to co-exist at the top of the new party as, respectively, secretary general and president.

Party Assessment: Istiqlal Party (60 MPs)

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¶13. (SBU) Background: Founded in 1944, the Istiqlal Party is the patriarch of Morocco's nationalist parties. It emerged as a result of national awareness and the need to organize the activities of nationalists in their struggle against French and Spanish occupation. It seeks to uphold Islamic values and advocates democratic government. On the eve of the 1992 parliamentary elections, it joined the Koutla alliance, or national democratic bloc, also comprising the USFP, Party for Progress and Socialism (PPS), and several other parties that have since abandoned the alliance. Working together, the alliance advocated and achieved a re-writing of the constitution in 1996. In October 2005, Istiqlal renewed its commitment to the Koutla and announced a pact with USFP for the 2007 elections, despite its

long-standing, often bitter, rivalry with the leftist party, according to Moroccan press reports.

¶14. (C) Strengths: Istiqlal has widespread name recognition and a well-organized, national presence at all levels of society. According to leader Abbas El Fassi, the party has instituted a 20-percent quota for women at each level of its bureaucracy and has two directly elected women parliamentarians, the most of any party except the PJD (ref E). It has a vibrant youth wing that meets regularly. It boasts strong Islamic credentials, speaks out frequently in favor of the Palestinians, and is a leading voice on nationalist causes like the Western Sahara. It counts on the support of organized labor, including the General Union of Moroccan Workers (UGTM). While historically pro-monarchy, it challenges the Palace, as illustrated by El Fassi's renewed appeals of late for more power for parliament and the prime minister. The party is aware of the most important social and economic problems facing the country.

¶15. (C) Weaknesses: Upper house councilor El Ansari told Poloff in December 2005 that the heads of Morocco's largest and most influential families continue to dominate the party's leadership structure and exert a tight grip on the direction of the party. While party members criticize the government and Palace behind closed doors, according to El Ansari, they are not free to air their grievances publicly. Wrapped up in the glory of its nationalist past, the party has a tendency to dwell on the fruits of its struggles rather than on the design of a new and innovative social program for the country. Along with USFP, it is the primary target of the PJD-led opposition's criticism of the Jettou government. It also carries the baggage of being the pet party of Morocco's historical Fes-based bourgeoisie, which dims its appeal to potential supporters in the context of Morocco's highly charged regional rivalries, according to Zarouf.

Party Assessment: Socialist Union of Popular Forces (56 MPs)

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¶16. (SBU) Background: Founded in 1975, the USFP traces its origins to leftist dissidents of the National Union of Popular Forces, which split from Istiqlal in 1956. Its vocal opposition to the government led to the arrest and conviction of many of its members, including first secretary and Minister of Territory Development, Water, and Environment, Mohamed El Yazghi. Ravaged by two decades of state oppression, it emerged in 1997 as just the second opposition party to lead the government and the first to take the reigns during the era of "government by alternation." The party is a strong proponent of Morocco's democratic transition. It seeks to rally all leftist parties around itself in a quest to form a united socialist left. In December 2005, it absorbed the Democratic Socialist Party (PSD) and acquired PSD's four lower house deputies. The move isolates the former Communist PPS and Parti Al Ahd, which with PSD had formed the Socialist Alliance. Also in December 2005, former secretary of state in charge of small and medium enterprises

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Abdelkrim Benatik left the party to create a new party, according to press; a small group of militants reportedly followed him.

¶17. (C) Strengths: The USFP has glowing credentials as a militant for democracy. It is not afraid to battle for change even at the price of self-sacrifice. "We have labored for three decades," USFP caucus chair Driss Lachgar told Poloff in 2005, "and if it takes another three to achieve the reforms we seek then we are prepared for it." In August 2005, the political bureau set up working groups to study social problems and recommend policy to the party, according to press. USFP is meeting with citizen groups to hear ideas and incorporate them into an innovative platform for 2007, press indicates. It's modernizing its structures and, following its June 2005 national congress, reportedly abolished its administrative and central committees, whose work was duplicative of the national council. It established



a 20-percent quota for women and 10 percent for youth in all governing bodies, except the political bureau. Its caucus is active and cohesive and its leader exerts considerable influence in parliament. The June 2005 congress appears to have cemented El Yazghi as party leader and Radi as his deputy; notwithstanding Benatik's departure and some rumblings from the youth wing, the party appears poised to fall in line behind El Yazghi in the run-up to 2007.

¶18. (C) Weaknesses: USFP's public image has plummeted since it joined the government in 1997. Now publicly regarded as a party that has been "bought," its democratic and reform credentials have taken a hit. A party of heady intellectuals and academics, it has lost touch with the population since assuming power. El Yazghi is often at odds with the youth wing and has waged an open battle with dynamic, 42-year old Secretary of State to the Prime Minister for Youth, Mohammed

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El Gahs, according to Moroccan youth leader Ahmed Ghayet and press sources. Other intense, internal rivalries also act as an anchor on the party's march toward a modernized and democratic internal structure, according to Zarouf. The creation of the Unified Socialist Party (PSU) following the September 2005 merger of the Unified Socialist Left with the Moroccan association Faithfulness to Democracy threatens USFP's goal of galvanizing the left around itself. A stronger than expected showing by the PSU in 2007 could divide the left into two rival formations and dilute its power in the lower house. Currently, deputies from all leftist parties account for just some 80 of the lower house's 325 seats, or 25 percent, according to Moroccan press. This means that the USFP will need to forge political, vice ideological, alliances with non-leftist parties to govern (like it has with Istiglal), which may undercut its base.

Party Assessment: Party for Justice and Development (42 MPs)

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¶19. (C) Background: The sole, legal Islamist party in Morocco, the PJD was established in 1998. Representing the union of religious hard-liners in the form of the Reform and Unification Movement with young, urban, middle class intellectuals and civic-minded volunteers, the party advocates good governance, social justice, and a strong prime minister and parliament. It opposes corruption, abuse of power, favoritism, irrational management of public finances, and inefficient public administration. It recognizes the King's religious authority, unlike the semi-legal Justice and Charity Organization. It has adopted a pragmatic and responsible approach to assuming power. Espousing a desire to learn how to govern in a gradual manner, the party agreed to limit the number of districts in which it ran candidates in the 2002 and 2003 elections but has signaled its intention to run full-bore in 2007. In November 2005, it signed a charter of cooperation with the liberal democratic Citizen Forces party, which enhances its image as a moderate party open to all partners. Secretary general Saad Eddin El Othmani also has stated publicly that the party is considering a possible alliance with the centrist National Rally of Independents (RNI). In December 2005, Mohamed Khalidi, who resigned from the party in the summer, and a small group of former PJD militants, founded a new party aimed at creating an alternative Islamist movement based on openness, pluralism, dialogue, and co-existence, according to press.

¶20. (C) Strengths: The PJD advocates a specific platform and holds its members accountable to defending it in all aspects of their political activities. Its serious and conscientious political action is inspired by a strong, faith-based, personal conviction. It invests heavily in protecting its public image; its deputies take pride in taking public transportation to attend parliamentary sessions and often refuse to attend events where alcohol is served. It enjoys the public perception of being a "no nonsense" organization. It is the single most active party at the grassroots level, especially in urban areas, and is a strong

practitioner of the politics of proximity. The PJD fines its caucus members for missing sessions in parliament. It gives its young militants opportunities to shine. It has a strong record on internal democracy and has advanced the role of women in its governing structures. (Note: The PJD caucus has the highest percentage of women deputies than any other party in the lower house. End Note.) According to Zarouf, it is the only party that can accurately quantify the level of its support in terms of number of likely votes in every electoral district.

¶21. (C) Weaknesses: The party's principle weakness lies in its religious reference. The GOM, which has warned us on several occasions that the "Islamists are not to be trusted," is very suspicious of the party's real intentions should it come to power. The May 16 terrorist bombings were a huge test for the party. It continues to try to differentiate itself from Islamic extremists by denouncing terrorist acts and being on the front lines of calls for tolerance and moderation. The public anti-alcohol and pro-hijab stands of party hard-liners make potential supporters nervous and lend weight to its rivals' arguments that it is too radical to be entrusted with public administration. Although its reputation for having strong internal democracy is well deserved, it remains to be seen whether the behind-the-scenes struggle between hard-liners and moderates would overly strain the party in the event it comes to power. (Note: As an example of this struggle, the general secretariat reversed the party's election of hard-liner Mustapha Ramid as caucus leader in favor of the more moderate Abdellah Baha in October ¶2004. In October 2005, however, the party chose Ramid to chair the Committee on Justice, Legislation, and Human Rights in the lower house. End Note.) Because of the Palace's misgivings about the party and the nature of Morocco's multi-party system, the PJD would need to seek an alliance with another party to form the majority; any potential partner is likely to have already been tainted by participating in previous governments.

Party Assessment: National Rally of Independents (39 MPs)  
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¶22. (SBU) Background: RNI emerged from a caucus comprising 61 deputies elected to parliament with no party affiliation who grouped together in 1978 after municipal and parliamentary elections in 1976 and 1977, respectively. The party is criticized for its close association with the monarchy -- indeed, it is widely believed that RNI was created by the Palace. Ex-prime minister and brother-in-law of former King Hassan II, Ahmed Osman, has led the party since its creation. RNI split in the 1980s, leading to the formation of the National Democratic Party. Osman's allegedly undemocratic management of party affairs prompted a mini-revolt in January 2006 when, under the threat of leaving the party, a group of deputies led by former Minister of Human Rights Mohamed Aujjar prevailed upon the executive board to agree to reform the party and consider a change in leadership, according to Moroccan press. Press sources indicate that Osman has reasserted control in recent weeks by making concessions, including holding weekly meetings with the executive board and establishing 16 committees to suggest ways to reform the party. In December 2005, Osman said the party, which had not yet been contacted by current majority partners USFP and Istiqlal concerning 2007 elections, was considering an alliance with the PJD, according to Aujourd'hui Le Maroc. Lower house deputy and deputy mayor of Rabat sister city Sale, Nouredine Lazrak, told Poloff in November 2005 that RNI could play the role as a moderating force in a PJD-led government.

¶23. (C) Strengths: Despite its dubious beginnings, the party evolved to represent the political interests of big business. Its main supporters and deputies still come mainly from the ranks of Morocco's wealthiest farmers, landowners, and bankers. RNI still has a strong presence in both houses of parliament; its caucus in the Chamber of Councilors (upper house) comprises 47 councilors (17 percent) and is the largest, while its lower house caucus is the fifth largest of

seven with 39 deputies (12 percent).

¶24. (C) Weaknesses: Because RNI represents the interests of privileged landowners and bankers, which are closely linked to those of the monarchy, it has little appeal among the masses and has no popular base, as borne out in IRI's recent poll on popular political attitudes (ref D). Osman's 28-year-long stranglehold on the party has extinguished most of the party's dynamism and further dimmed its appeal to its natural power base in business circles. The party desperately needs an infusion of new energy and a rebirth under new leadership. Yet Osman, who in an October 2004 meeting with the Ambassador was not engaged on any of the topics discussed and gave the impression of being aloof from his party and disengaged from Morocco's socio-economic realities (ref G), remains at the helm and will be difficult to unseat (should he wish to stay), despite the recent charge by Aujjar and company.

#### Other Parties

¶25. (SBU) Of Morocco's remaining parties, we assess that only the PPS, if it were to strengthen its alliance with Al Ahd, has any chance of surviving the 2007 elections and weathering the storm of complying with the new party law, which limits public funding for parties to those that win at least 5 percent of the national vote. Former Communists, the PPS is now a well-organized, democratic, modern party that is in close touch with societal and political realities in Morocco and is motivated to stay near the top. However, it is not the most effective party at translating its ideas into a platform and an election strategy that appeal to voters. It will struggle to, on its own, reach the 5-percent funding threshold in 2007. Its main weaknesses lie in a paltry voter base and in the USFP's efforts to force its hand by isolating it politically. USFP caucus chair Lachgar confirmed the USFP's strategy to marginalize the PPS to Poloff in a conversation in January 2006.

#### Comment

¶26. (C) We are persuaded that of Morocco's leading parties, the PJD and USFP are in the best position to take advantage of the political opening by King Mohammed. Each party is politically active, connected to the population (though USFP less so than PJD), and has a unique vision for the country. Each appears to be individually respected by the Palace as a formidable political force, judging by the Palace's oppressive treatment of the USFP since the 1970s (which has relaxed since it joined the government in 1997) and the Moroccan Government's repeated insinuations to us about the PJD's true intentions. Each is vocal about its desire to strengthen parliament's powers and expand the prerogatives of the prime minister in a tug of war with the monarchy. Both parties have equally high hopes for the 2007 elections, but the PJD's Islamic-framed political values gives it wider appeal, in our view, among everyday Moroccans, 60 percent of whom are uneducated and illiterate and therefore more prone to the PJD's appeals to the heart than the USFP's appeals to the intellect.

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